

## HANS URS VON BALTHASAR – CONSULTATION

Topic: Freedom  
 Convener: Jennifer Newsome Martin, University of Notre Dame  
 Moderator: Drenda Landers, Marquette University  
 Presenters: Christopher Hadley, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University  
 Travis LaCouter, KU Leuven  
 Respondent: Megan Heeder, Marquette University

In his paper, “The Spirit’s Personal Freedom in Balthasar’s Theology,” Christopher Hadley, S.J., offered a constructive account of “pneumatological personhood” and human and divine forms of freedom by pairing Balthasar’s strange and lyrical book *Heart of the World* alongside Shelly Rambo’s *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (2010). After offering critiques of hierarchalizing or subordinationist tendencies (gendered and otherwise) both latent and explicit in Balthasar’s trinitarian theology, Hadley’s paper demonstrated how “Rambo’s pneumatology and commentary on the Middle Spirit’s ministry to Mary Magdalene accentuates, challenges, and clarifies Balthasar’s pneumatology to reveal the personally free Holy Spirit Who is free from anthropomorphization.” Explicating the Balthasarian distinction between “individual” and “person” wherein personhood is constituted by a “graced participation in divine personhood via divinely initiated mutual relations with the persons of the Holy Trinity after the analogical pattern of their own mutual relations,” Hadley offered a definition of freedom as “manifesting the truth of a person’s self in a generous acknowledgment of the goodness of the other persons to whom one relates.” The paper then considered the “non-gendered” and “even seemingly impersonal” procession of the Spirit in Balthasar’s thought—especially as interpreted by Rambo’s three theological aesthetic themes of (1) wind/breath, (2) time, and (3) love/eros and as the trinitarian person who performs the mute and vulnerable witness to trauma—as a potentially fruitful starting point for reconstructing a pneumatologically-inflected anthropology free from any hierarchalizing *Tendenz* which, however, is still arguably authentically Balthasarian.

In “Playing the Part: Dramatic Action in Balthasar and Stanislavsky,” Travis LaCouter offered a theological reading of the experience of the space of the theatre, that “dark cavern of collective questioning” which can “teach us about how to use our own fragile and mysterious freedom.” Appealing to Balthasar’s fundamental theological problematic of the interaction of finite and infinite freedom, LaCouter proposed a turn to Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) as an equally significant and understudied Russian source for Balthasar, especially for the latter’s conception of theological freedom in the *Theo-Drama* and elsewhere. LaCouter traced Balthasar’s debts to Stanislavsky, including the parallels between Balthasar’s “given situation” and Stanislavsky’s “given circumstances,” both of which name a “bounded” freedom that is the product of the trifold interplay of the respective freedoms of others: (1) author/playwright, (2) actor, and (3) director. The second substantive section of the paper introduced both Balthasar’s notion of mission/personal vocation as role as well as Stanislavsky’s rich concept of the “*Ya Yesm*” (“I am”), an ancient church Slavonic

phrase that means something like, “I am in God and God is in me” and which, especially when articulated against the Russian background of *sobornost* (“togetherness”), implies the human relationality not only with God but also with other human beings. In this context LaCouter also identified further close resonances between Balthasar and Stanislavsky in their shared emphasis on readiness/availability, attention/attentiveness, and feeling. Finally, the paper offered three concluding points, including a renewed call to consider Stanislavsky as one of Balthasar’s Russian sources; the implication that “the Stanislavskian imprint of Balthasar’s dramatics” reveals a Balthasar who is particularly attuned to ethical action; and, finally, a query about what the performance of this radical “ensemble” freedom—marked by “genuine revision, experimentation, improvisation, collaboration, and adaptation”—would look like practically in the theological guild.

Megan Heeder then offered an integrated response essay which identified points of provocative convergence between Hadley’s and LaCouter’s respective presentations. Such points of convergence included the broadly trinitarian frame in which both were operating as well as an emphasis on *disponibilité*, vulnerability, and relationality, about which Heeder introduced a new interlocutor in Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” philosophy as a helpful frame against which both papers might be read. With respect to LaCouter’s concluding questions on practicing theology, Heeder suggested that the model of the theological pedagogue—the theologian as teacher in the classroom—might aptly illuminate the question of theology as ensemble craft and theologian as practitioner in a space which prioritizes both collaboration and improvisation. A lively and wide-ranging discussion followed in response to further questions and comments regarding what the “ensemble” or “theatrical” practice of theology might look like; the potential connections in and beyond Balthasar between the acceptance of a theatrical role and the acceptance of one’s personal vocation; whether and how we could speak theologically of the Holy Spirit’s suffering, vulnerability, and destitution; the relationship between performance, imagination, and eschatology; as well as further commentary about some of the contextual and historical particulars of how Stanislavsky navigated the political climate of Russia.

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